

The Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Building International Student Resilience

POLICY PREVIEW

LESSONS FROM WINDSOR-ESSEX
SERIES REPORT - 3

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The Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Building International Student Resilience: Lessons from the Windsor-Essex Region¹

International students are key pillars of Canada's education and immigration policy, and are aligned with Windsor-Essex region's efforts to develop and diversify. The *Building Migrant Resilience in Cities- Immigration et résilience en milieu urbain* (BMRC-IRMU) Partnership and the Windsor City Network convened the first of a series of public forums in January 2020, examining international education, immigration and nation-building. Panelists – including national and regional policy influencers, post-secondary faculty, administration, and an international student representative – discussed how colleges, universities, and service providers could support international students' resilience, education, employability, and successful settlement.

Canadian cities continue to attract rising numbers of international students, with Windsor registering the highest year-over-year growth (+54%), according to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2018). The University of Windsor hosts the highest percentage of International graduate students (57%) nationally (Maclean's Canada, 2017).

A number of unique characteristics make Windsor a popular choice for international students, who represent 3.3 per cent of the

Windsor-Essex population (Windsor Star, 2020). These include its position as an important hub for the automotive industry, its proximity to the United States, and a reputation as an affordable, dynamic, and open city.

CONTEXT OF RECEPTION

Students' experiences in relatively small communities such as Windsor, where they are vital and visible members, is different from their experiences in metropolitan cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal that welcome waves of incoming international students each year. Policies and programs for international students at colleges and universities vary by region, province and city ([Valerie Preston](#) Professor, York University; BMRC -IRMU Principal Investigator).

[Paul Davidson](#) (President, Universities Canada) reflected on the diversity of experiences that students have across rural and urban Canada. Pointing to examples of Cape Breton University and Vancouver Island University, he noted that the range of supports available vary across the receiving communities and among diaspora groups. [Sutama Ghosh](#) (Associate Professor, Ryerson University) added that

¹ This summary is based on a review of the BMRC-IRMU Knowledge Exchange Event held at University of Windsor, Canada in January 2020. The views expressed here are the authors' and they are responsible for any errors or omissions.

international students' access to scholarships and services, in some instances, is predicated on different provincial funding models.

In his remarks, [Rakesh Naidu](#) (President, Windsor-Essex Chamber of Commerce) described the demographic and labour market factors shaping the local response to international students. For communities like Windsor that are recovering from a downturn in key industries, the influx of international students can help buoy local businesses, offset an aging workforce, and drive economic growth.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND INTERNATIONALIZATION

Institutional 'internationalization' imperatives encompass a broad set of initiatives including an emphasis on marketing Canadian higher education globally as well as responding to the needs of marginalised groups around the world. [Chris Busch](#) (Associate Vice-President of Enrolment, University of Windsor) indicated that the process has evolved from international recruitment efforts to include supporting inbound students and bringing a global perspective to curriculum and teaching.

"Unmonitored and unplanned international student recruitment can be dangerous" [Wesam Abdelhamid Mohamed](#) (International Students' Commissioner, Canadian Federation of Students) cautioned. Increased internationalization can be risky if capacity, especially financial

resources, is insufficient to address student needs.

International Student Services are no longer at the margins of campus operations, in fact, as [Paul Davidson](#) noted, "the international dimension of Canadian universities is moving closer and closer to the centre." Panelists agreed that while the infrastructure, supports, and orientation towards international students has improved at Canadian campuses, there has been divergence between expanding universal services for all versus developing distinct programming tailored to international students and other minority groups.

However, as a former international student-[Sutama Ghosh](#) and service providers such as Reza Shahbazi (Executive Director, New Canadians' Centre of Excellence) observed, cost-cutting in the settlement sector has resulted in a rollback of specialized support for international students and limited their eligibility for community services. The responsibility for providing comprehensive services – from mental health to immigration and career counselling – for international students has fallen on post-secondary institutions whose international office staff are not equipped or trained systematically to cater to these needs.

COMMUNITY CONNECT AND CAREER LINKS

As universities and colleges work to enhance and expand campus supports, as well as pre-arrival and post-graduation engagement with international students,

community partnerships can help with capacity building and addressing broader international student concerns.

[Ron Seguin](#) (Vice President, International Relations, Campus Development & Student Services, St Clair College) pointed to linkages with community and connections to industry as fundamental strengths of the Canadian college system. Alongside increased resourcing for international student advisors, St Clair College invites settlement agencies and businesses to deliver workshops, and offers training and experiential learning opportunities.

A central focus has been how to ensure international students have genuine intercultural experiences that will embed them more deeply in local communities.

[Wesam Abdelhamid Mohamed](#) called for more representation in student bodies, elected office, and other platforms.

As agents of innovation and demographic renewal, retention of international students is an important, job-filling strategy in the Windsor-Essex region. However, [Chris Busch](#) suggested that there is a misalignment between post-secondary programs and labour market needs.

According to him, the University of Windsor struggles with tracking where international students and graduates work. Owing to shorter program durations, often less than two years, and less-established alumni

networks, Windsor is often just “one stop on a ‘Brain Train’ before they move on.”

Rakesh Naidu emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for labour market integration and for migrants to be a part of succession planning at local companies. He introduced *Aye Work*, an online tool that helps match local job seekers with employers in real-time. Such initiatives are a step towards solving gaps in career services for international students – enabling employers to spot available talent, educating them on legislative and administrative requirements of employing international students, and eliminating some of the hiring biases that international students or graduates on a Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) are *temporary* and therefore unsuitable.

International student intake has become a primary source of funding for educational institutions and a boost for local economies. Communities and campuses must accept mutual accountability for improving the international student experience. Building bridges between settlement sector agencies and current or prospective international students can help equip them better for life in Canada and for navigating the residency process.

For more information about the panel and upcoming events, please contact bmrcirmu@yorku.ca